Tuff Breeches

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Tuff Breeches

by

Arkadiy Ryabin

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of the requirements of the degree of
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May 22, 2017
Date

Constance Dejong
Signature

May 22, 2017
Date

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Signature of Second Reader
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History surrounds us in fragments; it is implicated and explicated. I was born in the former Soviet Union—what is currently Donetsk, Ukraine. In 1991 I moved to New York with my parents, under an anti-Semitic asylum policy based in Russia. This move was complicated by political and familial tensions related to immanent dangers. With aspirations of climbing the social ladder, my parents worked in Manhattan where I would accompany them for visits. The nineties in New York seemed fairly optimistic to most, riding the strong financial wave of the eighties—under David Dinkins crime was down, and cosmopolitan opportunities were budding. Enthralled by the aura, I was drawn to the sensorial dynamics of the metropolis. Acting as a platform/catch-all for those at wits-end ideologically, New York has the ability to (re)invent narratives.

Should I be earnest? How much should be exaggerated?

I involved myself with sub-cultures abundant in metropolitan New York, mining an energized American youth force-field contextualized by experiences of involuntary immigration, and class difference. Skateboarding has beset my knowledge with various languages of the “street”—architecture, cryptic signifiers, ways of attaining sustenance, navigation. This street has a wide

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1 I’m particularly attuned to the political resistance of generation Xer’s (such as the opposition to the Vietnam War), its cycle of normalization and inheritance by subsequent millennials.

2 Toy machine, welcome to hell, element, osiris, the storm, jump off a building, zoo york, circa, puffy shoes, baggy denim, sweaty glistening body, cargo shorts and pants, over-extended belts, stickers, gallons of water, dirt, under the Brooklyn bridge, subsisting on fast food, confrontations with guards.
variety of contexts – such as “keeping youth off the streets (implying criminality)”; being “raised on the streets (implying urban living, a know-how, a sense of thick skin, a sense of wit, strategic thinking, constant awareness, self-sufficiency, building a community) – ultimately denoting a seeming “autonomy” from institutionalization. Seemingly, a site where events follow the logic of spontaneity.

I’m often in a conflicted relation to language. It is productive to use it as a navigational tool to position myself within formations of knowledge, and, when I learn that something has acquired so much use in language that it functions to describe a phenomenon, it is a relief to shift from individual to group commonality. I struggle at this point to gain back my individuality, which is a dark space to navigate but is a pure human being. This struggle may reoccur over time.

I do not wish to bathe in this history but to examine it with a critical eye. I am a seed that was blown and landed on foreign land, which I was to call home. My story is not different from that of others. We slowly traverse the terrain to attain a sense of who we are, where we are, and how we arrived here. There is something special about humanity in that it yearns to understand itself, complicated by the multitude methods of communication, competition and survival – thus creating grounds for absurdity. I relate to this because I noticed how one creates a mythology via a narrative, either because the past is too chaotic or non-existing. My mother constantly says “never go back, only forward,” not even slightly questioning her motivation towards and the current state of the “American Dream.”

As I stand in front of the mirror I look at myself. Am I really me? To what extent am I creating this signification or uniqueness of situation? I say a word – it’s meaning apparent, I say it again – it’s sound apparent, a third time – I become aware of how it reflects off the surface and then the surface’s construct, and how it arrived there physically, and how it arrived there intellectually, and how it arrived there legally, and how it arrived there illegally, and how it makes me feel, and ways it can be decorated, and ways it can be obscured, and ways it can be forgotten, and ways it can be exposed. How many times have I said this word? My thoughts intertwined with physical action, to
produce infinite possibilities of meaning and context. How can this situation be facilitated again? I was not under the influence in any sort of way. I push and pull in agony of perpetual slip of intention.

I did not feel like the rest, nor did I feel the desire to be around those like me (evident in origin) but really where do these qualities begin and end? To clarify I made every attempt to conceal the mother-tongue and more broadly the mother-body, the mother’s body. My mother did not like that I attempted to conceal her body, why would she if this is her body, nobody or no-one would really appreciate that. When I wanted to wear Nikes or hoodies, that was not so easy to convince. To re-clarify, I ditched the tribal mentality and did not spend time with those who spoke Russian, or actually now that I am making sense of it all, if it did actually happen, we never spoke in Russian among each other; language possesses the agency to obscure the past. In fact even in public a sense of shame was felt in using or hearing the past-language, the only exception being, speaking to elders. All-in-all a complex system of acute awareness to coded signifiers, dialects, and slang came to be; one subtly differentiated accent, ways of and style of clothing to signify a micro-identity. I would say my first artwork was testing the status quo of dress, and it’s discerning questions of belonging.

Writing has a certain type of agency in present day, especially in the context of the romanticized studio artist occupying an over-sized loft in the next gentrified industrial neighborhood; the reality of which is disheartening, as the contemporary artist living in NYC works so excessively to pay dual-rents that they do not have the time to be in sa(i)d studio. Thus something supposedly so de-materialized carries weight and practicality.
As most can agree the process of art consists of a process of semiotics – sensorial information that registers into the mind and produces meaning within the individual; this interacts with other systems of knowledge and beliefs to construct signification within the individual. To what extent does this process reflect on the individual's relationship to the socio-economic/political?

During undergraduate studies I focused on media theory dealing with how representation affects development of, I transitioned to documentary photography – being interested in my subjectivity in midst of an inherited banal American landscape, sculpture – ways to re-contextualize the object via language parameters ultimately liberating it from anthropocentric demands.

Currently I work in formats/genres that have come naturally to me – video, sound, installation, performance, and artist’s books. My way of working promotes a research-based practice and a literary organization, for example structures such as chapters, stories, albums, and anecdotes. I’m partial to the every-day as an entry point into abstract ways of being and understanding time-space relations in the context of various chaotic systems.

I do not create the art but it creates me; its malleability and undefined nature is a series of complex configurations. My works function in many ways; for me the work’ strength is the ability to cross-pollinate various networks. I am influenced by Luis Camnitzer’s idea of “art thinking” (as opposed to art making), existing within his pedagogic and writings practices. Camnitzer argues that “it creates itself while it allows the play with taxonomies, the making of illegal and subversive connections, the creation of alternative systems of order, the defiance of known
systems, and the critical thinking and feeling of everything."³ Art is truly the absolute fantastic that shakes and re-orders all ideas of being; this is my metric for efficacy. I have to trust my subjectivity in employing first hand empirical a posteriori knowledge and experience in my personal formation of what constitutes meaning; allowing theoretical formations to inform but not dominate this field.

Subjectivity is all we have because we all have it, it contains affects of liberation and agency. I experienced the insular nature of growing up at the climax of a totalitarian establishment and take interest in the cultural and artistic expression that existed despite strict censorship and control. This can be found in the cartoons⁴, popular films, literature and works of Moscow Conceptualists. The public nature of Soviet ideology created situations of forced repression. I consider how this relates to elements of current day American public repression despite the seeming freedom provided by capitalism. The “Russian Soul” or voice is best described by the slang-formalized term “skaz” (translating to story or to tell), described by Boris Eikhenbaum⁵ in his discussion of Nikolai Gogol's Overcoat⁶. Eikhenbaum locates it's oral origins in literature, particularly the adoption of a persona, improvisation, spontaneity, verbal play, and dialect (this is in relationship to footnote #2). In other words the literary style of skaz becomes embodied, physical and performative, the content can be found in the stylistic elements rather than


⁴ In 2016 I made a book, Basement Theory which contained notes I’ve been taking of my dreams upon waking up, combined with iconic images of the 1970s Soviet cartoon Ny Pagadi (translates to just you wait) in which a wolf attempts to capture a bunny in a similar logic to “Tom & Jerry”. The wolf and bunny for me were generational symbols, among many things, the wolf being the conservative grump of the working class and the bunny a naive optimist of the youth. I regarded these images as expressions of pure psyche and chose the images containing the moment of highest tensions involving the capture plans of the wolf. The content of my dream notes was sexual, mundane, architectural and neurotic.


syntactical logic of a given language. Soviet censorship relates here as the narrative and content seemingly appears to be mundane in both eras of ideology, but the actual information is derived in the spaces surrounding the content.

I’m The Wiz

The first matter of business for making it in the United States, a moment of validation, is the acquisition of a stereo system and specifically the following CDs: The Beatles Anthology, and Beastie Boys Anthology. The stereo system was acquired at an electronic store somewhere along Kings Highway in southern Brooklyn, the other Brooklyn. The CDs were purchased at Nobody Beats The Wiz (The Wiz) on Avenue U and Flatbush, down the street from Kings Plaza. It’s important to distinguish that my dad went to the Russian-speaking and owned businesses for these major purchases because he would cut him a deal if he paid with cash, some sort of tax avoidance. The Wiz had a giant, creepy mural of the characters from The Wizard of Oz. They had two stores across from each other, one dealt with appliances (where we did not go because they didn’t cut us the break) and the other, with various media, CDs, movies, etc. “Nobody Beats the Wiz,” was their slogan. The store is no longer there; apparently defunct since 2003, it is now replaced by a space that is for sale, and Medical Staffing Network, across the street, is now Furniture Zone and Sneakeasy, except the “sy” is missing and an additional “y” was added, so it reads “SNEAKEA_y,” also for sale. This sign is hard to read so I cross the street to get a closer look and all of a sudden the stores transform: a dollar store, a general electronic store, a furniture store, and a kitchen/bath tile
store called Euro. And when I turn around the old Wiz has become American Furniture. This is all according to Google maps.

When this threshold of the CD world was infiltrated, The Beatles Anthology was the compromise I made with my mom, who was still careful in controlling what I listened to. I think she figured it was something kind of cool but not that cool and kind of safe and edgy at the same time. I think the Beatles were OK by my parents’ standards—maybe it is because of their affirmative hit
“Back in the USSR,” which I never understood—why are they happy being there when my parents were not and came to the U.S.?

I have stepped into a stream of other histories, intertwined and entangled, that in-turn implicate me as part of a history that I investigate. In 1976 The Wiz was started by the four Jamal brothers Marvin, Lawrence, Stephen, Douglas—children of Syrian Jewish immigrants. Roughly at about the same time, Eddie Antar started a similarly styled chain of stores called “Crazy Eddie.” With the Jamals, Lawrence and Douglas were specialized in construction and real estate while the other two brothers handled the financial and managerial tasks. With Eddie, his father was CEO and his cousin managed the bookkeeping. Both the Antar and Jamal families lived in the same South Brooklyn neighborhood that I moved to and grew up in roughly two decades later.

Entertainment was absorbed, digested and put out. “The Wiz” was named after the 1974 Broadway musical which Norman Jamal, the father of the brothers fell in love with. The musical was the urban adaption of the earlier film and novel, featuring prominent actresses/actors/musicians of the African-American community: *The Wiz: The Super Soul Musical "Wonderful Wizard of Oz"*. Both businesses were infamous for their television commercials. The Wiz sponsored athletes from all the local professional sports teams and used catchy jingles to advertise new locations and their deals; in one television spot the NY Knicks 1990s starting lineup is playing poker with “WIZ points (equivalent of gift certificates).” In the commercials of Crazy Eddie he was played by a well known radio DJ of the time Jerry Carroll, who portrayed a manic salesman set in fantastic scenarios of jingles, price-cuts, and raining currency. The Wiz

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7 Perhaps it’s worth noting the fulcrum in both narratives as a journey to return back home via a city. The Emerald City being the case in the book/screen play and New York City for the Jamals.

8 Yankees, Knicks, Mets, New Jersey Nets, Rangers, New Jersey Devils and Islanders.

became successful and expanded to approximately 100 locations, thanks to the real estate expertise of the brothers and Crazy Eddie to about 40 locations in the NY-CT-NJ tri-state area.

*The Wiz* claimed bankruptcy in 1998, to be bought out by Cablevision with the ultimate closing in 2003. Crazy Eddie was bought out by a corporate venture in 1986 at which point, subtle hints of fraud and conspiracy were emerging; Eddie Antar fled the country with multiple passports and was a renegade for two years, his arrest was made when he tried to access $40 million in a savings account in a foreign country. The Jamals had no issues with the law at the time of the store’s existence, though all the brothers were involved in law suites in subsequent start-up ventures. In addition to unethical activities, the demise of said chains occurred concurrently with the shift of global communication and entertainment technologies. The rise of nationwide superstores such as Best Buy and Circuit City, and the shift in demands from passive devices to interactive and dynamic technologies of personal computers caused millennials such as myself to attain their entertainment digitally.

**Regional Globalist By Way Of Growing Up In A Metropolis**

When I proposed earlier that “New York has the ability to (re)invent narratives,” in addition to John Starks appearing playing poker in the Wiz commercial, I coincidentally thought of an image of him on a basketball court wearing a New York Knicks jersey bearing the number 3, sinking a 3-point shot while Knicks fans cheer him on at Madison Square Garden,
while the “charge” organ theme is heard. A major contribution to his myth stemmed from his ability to overcome benign problems with the law, relatively small athletic stature, and working as a grocery bag boy; he even had a significant on court injury at the beginning of the season which left the franchise with no choice but to keep him on the roster. When he was given a chance to play he did so incredibly well, and provided hope for a chance in the championship, despite the Knicks not winning one throughout 1990s. His underdog mythology not only was a good fit in perpetuating the narrative of success in a big city but also as a response to the national recession that occurred in 1990. Because of this reputation in the public’s view he was seen as a quintessential “New Yorker.”

The legend’s origin could be found early on in Washington Irving’s 1809 *A History of New York from the Beginning of the World to the End of the Dutch Dynasty*\(^{10}\) (*HNY*), written under the pseudonym of Diedrich Knickerbocker. It was a satirical revisionist work of the present New York region, then known as New Amsterdam and spans seven books. Beginning with origin creation myths, it covers the first Dutch settlement (including the infamous purchase of Manhattan from Native tribes), the three governors of the then called New Amsterdam region, and ends with the English acquisition. The work’s speculative nature is able to put forth a humorous fantastic image, one that despite a two-century gap of accounting and publication was able to gain momentous currency. It also should be said that Irving’s account of colonization was critical of the settlers in their relations with the Native tribes, in an ironic manner that happened to slip through the cracks. As in my writing of personal experience with migration and complications of language, ideology, and family narratives, Irving, being astute to such phenomena took the liberty to do the same with the geographical region of New York, for which he praised the Dutch as the “true” forefathers and appropriated their “customs.” His success was due to the public’s lack of monuments — as the break with England resulted in a gap within customs, traditions,

heroes, and ideologies — and the destruction of a majority of NY’s archival records throughout the American Revolution; a tabula rasa for Irving.

Gogol’s *Overcoat* and *HNY* have much in common other than both being written in the 19th century. They possess a similar tone of societal criticism, and take as it’s point of departure very mundane and underwhelming subjects matters as vehicles for narrative, which develops into history more than the genre of history writing. For Gogol it was clearly the overcoat in it’s various states of desire, actualization, and loss; for Irving it was items such as breeches and doughnuts. Objects become possessed, independent of human agency, loaded with their own, to transcend possibilities of various symbolic values.

As I continue to consider the terrain of current-day New York, I hear many opinions and claims of urban ownership. There is an aura that pervades the metropolitan site and I believe *HNY* is a significant contributor to this. Physicality and objects, and their evidence is what remains solid, the possibilities of intellectualization and fantasizing are malleable.

In my approach to researching and production I am focused on the relationship of the video format to literary form, especially as this relationship touches on conventions such as genres, and styles. I am interested in the moving image format as a point of exploration relating to video as a vernacular technology able to entertain, educate, and become a subject of intellectualization, and how this can be in relation to the prose of Irving’s text at the peak of it’s prime consumption. In thinking about textual and contextual characteristics of *HNY*, within video I’m interested in the especially liminal spaces that can be sculpted/exaggerated (think of pulling an accordion) in order to highlight the constructed nature of the audio/video space. To find further pockets of the unrealistic nature of video, I am exploring the relationship of props and objects; depicted objects in video automatically take on the position of props (as the name suggests, an object supporting another) while in real/architectural space they begin to hold their
own autonomy and function metaphorically, metaphysically, or structurally. Objects become props and vice versa.

Since I am a regional globalist by way of growing up in a metropolis, I assume the systems existing here to be a microcosm. My experiences that have to do with systems of power leading to injustice leads me to investigate such systems through a subjective perspective, as opposed to a rationalized scholarly investigation. While the latter is vital in attaining knowledge of the history such injustices I choose to emphasize an expression through experiential means based on emotional and aesthetic approaches. I am highly influenced by Irving’s text because it’s legacy lives on, and stands for me as almost a square root of the possible.

I put forth my own subjectivity, an aura I experience—not visible, it is composed of humor, facts, language (and lack of), the everyday and is psychologically charged. I believe that deep subjectivity turns one inside out and results in an expulsion of objective understanding, thus complicating the relationship between the two. I am interested in putting that subjectivity/my subjectivity under a microscope and simultaneously exploring its macro qualities, prompting abstraction, while retaining aspects, perspectives, and acknowledging the human lens.
Bibliography


## Thesis Exhibition Image List

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